AFRICAN CHRISTIANITY IN THE JEWISH STATE:
ADAPTATION, ACCOMMODATION AND
LEGITIMIZATION OF MIGRANT WORKERS’
CHURCHES, 1990-2003

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ABSTRACT

This paper examines the role of African Initiated Churches (AICs) in the lives of African migrant laborers in Israel. Its aim is to attain a deeper understanding of religion and church affiliation among African migrant laborers in Israel from the perspective of the Africans themselves. It traces the creation and development of the AICs in Israel, including the various services and activities that the churches provided for their members in the social, economic and political arenas. It argues that the African churches in Israel occupied a particularly large and central place in their members’ lives compared to migrant churches in other western diasporas, taking on roles of other traditional social, economic, political and civil actors in Africa. The paper examines the AICs’ multiple adaptations to unique conditions in Israel and to the needs of their membership. Though many of the patterns identified are similar to those found in other diaspora communities, certain features of Israel and its society, mainly those connected to the Jewish identity of the State of Israel and the limited civic horizon open to non-Jews, made for substantial differences. These features forced Africans to create their own Afro-Christian space to fulfill their needs and became the key anchors in the spiritual, emotional and practical lives of the African migrants in Israel. Finally this article argues that the churches became the main space for the production of a sense of belonging within the Israeli civic context, in spite of the fact that the migrants’ religious identities and institutions were not used as vehicles for recognition or channels for gaining legitimacy in Israel’s public sphere.

Introduction

I love my church. . . . Going there gives me power. . . . I go there almost every day to pray. . . . I ask God to give me a good job, money and a nice husband. . . . Lately things have changed in this country. . . . It is not as good as it used to be. . . . Nowadays I ask God to stop these policeman from arresting us on the streets and to make the government understand that we are not criminals. . . . We only want to work. . . . and then go back home (Beatrice, 2003).1
Beatrice, a 32-year-old Nigerian woman, arrived in Israel in 1992 officially on a pilgrimage but actually looking for work. Like many other African migrants in Israel, she found employment as a house cleaner. The great importance that the church and religion assumed in her life is an experience shared by many African migrants to Israel, and one that helped them, like her, to endure the hardships they faced, both in their personal lives and as migrants in a foreign and not entirely welcoming land. Like her, most African migrants to Israel joined a church soon after their arrival and found in the church succor of all sorts: spiritual, of course, but also social, economic, and political.

Religious institutions and practices have received relatively little attention in studies of modern African immigration; that is, of the large waves of Africans who migrated to Europe and North America, beginning in the 1980s. Religion has long been recognized as a central component in the lives of migrant communities. Recent literature has emphasized the role of religion in the processes of identity-formation of immigrants and of migrants in general, as well as migrants’ use of their religion and religious institutions to gain legitimacy in their host countries. There have also been some studies of the appeal and impact of charismatic Pentecostalism, a form of Christianity that fosters the formation of transnational identities. However, the studies of African migrants have concentrated largely on their reasons for migration; the policies, laws and difficulties they encounter in their host country; and the socio-political and ethnic associations that they form. Very few concentrate on their religious organization in the diaspora. To the best of my knowledge, the notable exceptions are papers by van Dijk on the Ghanaian Pentecostal diaspora in the Netherlands, Simon on African independent preachers in Europe and Adogame on Nigerian churches in Ghana.

The paucity of attention to religion leaves a major gap in our understanding of African migrants, whether to Israel or elsewhere, and of their patterns of accommodation. Religion, whether as spiritual force or a source of social identity, belonging and recognition, is a powerful component of people’s lives, especially in times of uncertainty and crisis, like migration. Moreover, as has often been observed, religion is an important component in the lives of many Africans, and religious organizations throughout Africa serve as a major channel of political and social expression. It is only natural for Africans to draw upon their religious practices and beliefs in their countries of migration.

This paper, based mainly on participant observation and interviews with hundreds of Africans, examines the role of African Initiated
Churches (AICs) in the lives of African migrant laborers in Israel. Its aim is to attain a deeper understanding of religion and church affiliation among African migrant laborers in Israel from the perspective of the Africans themselves. It traces the creation and development of the AICs in Israel, including the various services and activities that the churches provided for their members in the social, economic and political arenas. I will show that the African churches in Israel occupied a particularly large and central place in their members’ lives compared to migrant churches in other Western diasporas, taking on roles of other traditional social, economic, political and civil actors in Africa.

Before going any further, it is important to point out that at the time of writing, the beginning of 2004, the African community in Israel is very much diminished. Increased deportations of undocumented migrant laborers from the middle of 2003 have greatly reduced their numbers and undermined the rich community life that they created. In fact, there is hardly any public community life left and the little that exists has been driven underground.

When they arrived in Israel, the Africans found neither a home within the existing Christian space of the Holy Land, nor a place within the civic-public Israeli space. They felt alienated from the local Christians, mainly Arabs, because of different religious practices, but also partly because of African Christians’ animosity toward Islam and the clear link in their perception of Arabs as Muslims. The descriptions of their concept of Israel as the Holy Land, and the complexities and anxieties arising out of their attitude to the Palestinian conflict and to the Muslim world described here, are all based on what the Africans themselves said to me and on what I observed.

Interaction with Israeli-Jewish society was limited to Africans’ role as house cleaners. Africans were considered by Israelis to be ‘nice’ people, but there were few connecting spheres of social life and practically no intermarriage. The Africans made use of Israeli medical services as well as services provided by civilian NGOs; however, they rarely entered Israeli public social zones, such as recreational activities or cultural centers. This was not because they could not afford to or because they were afraid to (before mass deportation began), but mainly because these functioned in Hebrew and were very Israeli-Jewish oriented, and the Africans did not view themselves as immigrants to Israel but only as temporary residents.

In Israel, the African migrant laborers needed to carve out their own niche not only because the existing churches did not suit them, but also to produce a sense of belonging within the experiential context of
uprootedness, displacement and marginality. This paper examines the AICs’ multiple adaptations to unique conditions in Israel and to the needs of their membership. Though many of the patterns identified are similar to those found in other diaspora communities, certain features of Israel and its society, mainly those connected to the Jewish identity of the State of Israel and the limited civic horizon open to non-Jews, made for substantial differences. These features forced Africans to create their own Afro-Christian space to fulfill their needs, provide them with the cultural and social legitimacy they wanted and needed—not only in relation to Israel, but also vis-à-vis Africa and the larger Christian world.

This article has four parts. The first describes the context of non-Jewish labor migration to Israel in general, and of migrant workers from Africa in particular. It identifies and analyzes the unique features of the African community in comparison to other migrant groups in Israel. The second part traces the emergence of an African arena with the AICs as its central pillar, placing special emphasis on the cultural alienation and strong religious and political feelings in relation to the existing Christian community in the Holy Land. An attempt is made to map the various needs to which the church attended and to analyze how the church constructed itself as the main social, theological, personal and communal arena of Africans in Israel. The third part characterizes the African churches in Israel and traces changes within the churches as a result of the complex encounter with Israeli laws, regulations and constraints on one hand, and their members’ needs on the other. It shows how the churches became the key anchors in the spiritual, emotional and practical lives of the African migrants in Israel. The last part focuses on how the churches became the main space for the production of a sense of belonging within the Israeli context, in spite of the fact that the migrants’ religious identities and institutions were not used as vehicles for recognition or channels for gaining legitimacy in Israel’s public sphere.

Between Africa and Israel—laws, regulations, anxieties and shattered dreams

Migrant workers began to arrive in Israel in the late 1980s, at the time of the first Palestinian uprising, or intifada. Until that time, few foreign nationals worked in Israel and there were no clear policies or regulations concerning international laborers. With the increasing violence and defensive closures brought on by the intifada, the government licensed manpower companies to import migrant laborers from abroad
to replace the Palestinian workers who until then had formed the bulk of the workforce in agriculture and construction. The first such workers to arrive were Turks, Romanians, Chinese and Thais. Along with these licensed workers, persons without valid working visas also entered the country, first in a trickle and then in a flood, and found employment. Among these undocumented workers were Africans.

Although a democracy, Israel has a strict labor-migration policy more comparable to that of the Gulf states and countries in Southeast Asia than to prevailing regulations in most western countries. Israel does not allow residence without a work permit, does not recognize right of family reunification, and does not guarantee access to housing, social benefits or medical care. It does, however, allow for the arrest and expulsion of undocumented migrants at any time by simple administrative decree.

According to estimates of the Central Bureau of Statistics, by the end of 2001 there were some 240,000 foreign migrant laborers in Israel, about 60 percent of whom lacked work permits, and by 2003, because of increased deportations of undocumented migrant laborers from the middle of that year, the number was reduced to about 189,000. In spite of this, in 2004, Israel still has one of the highest percentages of migrant laborers in the world relative to the size of the country’s labor force and population. Migrant laborers make up some 9 percent of Israel’s labor force and 3-4 percent of its total population of around 5.5 to 6 million.

This high percentage of migrant laborers is rather surprising considering that Israel, founded as a haven for Jews after centuries of persecution, defines itself as a Jewish state. The Law of Return (1950) entitles Jews from anywhere in the world to immigrate to Israel. The Law of Citizenship (1950) grants them automatic citizenship upon their arrival in the country. Non-Jews, by contrast, have almost no legal avenues to citizenship or even to official temporary resident status. One of the main outcomes of this self-definition as a Jewish state is the prevalent perception in Israel that labor migrants are temporary workers and not prospective citizens; they are outsiders culturally, socially and politically.

Despite the exclusiveness of the Law of Return, the risk of Palestinian terror and, beginning in the late 1990s, the government’s policy of deporting undocumented migrant laborers, Israel became an attractive destination for migration. Africans, driven out of their own countries by economic hardship and political instability, migrated to Israel (as well as to countries in Europe, North America and elsewhere in the
Middle East). Entering Israel on a pilgrim or tourist visa was easy; hourly wages for the cleaning work that the Africans could get were relatively high; and, after the first wave of migrants, those who followed had a good support system to help them find employment, housing and friends. All in all, Africans were drawn to the country as a place where they could make good money and this attraction was stronger than the risks and restrictions. Indeed, most of the men and women I interviewed were aware before they came that they would never obtain citizenship and were resigned, at least ostensibly, to a temporary stay.

The first Africans to enter Israel as workers came in the employ of Israeli families returning from Africa. In time, others arrived as trainees in various vocational training programs organized by the Israeli Foreign Office and stayed on. The majority came as pilgrims on tourist visas. The first arrivals were men. These were followed by women who began to arrive in large numbers in the mid-1990s. The majority settled in the slum neighborhoods of Tel Aviv, mostly around the old central bus station, where they found relatively cheap housing, discount shops and food markets, good bus transportation to all parts of the city and the country and, above all, the company of other migrant laborers, including Africans. Tel Aviv, the largest and wealthiest city in Israel, offered a variety of potential workplaces. Over the years, some, especially those with children, moved to better neighborhoods in and around Tel Aviv. In the mid-1990s, some, following employment opportunities, also began to establish small communities in Haifa, Jerusalem and Eilat.

The African migrants came mainly from Nigeria and Ghana, with smaller numbers from almost all other African countries. The vast majority came without working permits and therefore were undocumented and illegal according to the Israeli laws. There are no official figures for the number of Africans in Israel. Figures collected by various bodies put the number between 10,000 and 14,000 at the end of the 1990s. However, after massive deportation, in 2002-2003 that number dropped to between 4,000 and 8,000, and by the beginning of 2004, the estimated number of Africans was between 2,000 and 4,000 with only several hundred recognized as refugees by the UN Commission for refugees (UNHCR) and therefore granted temporary work permits.

Most of the Africans were employed in menial jobs in the service sector. Some worked in light industry, small construction companies or gardening. A few created their own businesses, mostly to meet needs of other migrant laborers. These included babysitting services and nursery schools, photographers, computer experts, transporters, handymen, painters and importers of food and other commodities from Africa. Many of these entrepreneurs combined a paid job with their business.
Africans in Tel Aviv created an impressive network of associations of all types: national, ethnic and religious associations, rotating credit associations, labor unions, sports clubs and women’s organizations, among others. These organizations catered to the social, economic and cultural needs of the community and also played an active role in lobbying for amelioration of Israeli policy towards migrant workers. A similar tendency to organization can be found among African migrants in Europe and North America, as well as among other migrant laborers in the West. To some extent, this tendency may be attributed to the exclusions and deprivations suffered by migrants in general, but it also owes something to the rich tradition of associational life in Africa which the migrants brought with them in the process of migration.

In Israel, the associational life of the Africans was particularly rich. The findings of this research clearly show that two features of their situation contributed to this. One is their unorganized means of arrival and lack of legal status in Israel. Lacking the (very mixed) blessing of a manpower agency to provide them with work and housing, they had to make their own arrangements and find their own way to fulfill their needs. As a result, they relied on informal networks. The migrants’ strong sense of family also provided them with strong motivation to build their own social networks that would cater, first and foremost, to the needs of families.

The other feature was the lack of services available to migrant laborers in Israel. Aside from a handful of NGOs that provided medical and legal assistance, only one state-sponsored body (The Center for Assistance and Information for the Foreign Community, established only in 1999) provided information, legal assistance, professional training and welfare services to all migrants, regardless of their legal status. Moreover, enforcement of labor migrants’ rights in terms of wages, hours, living conditions, health care and so forth, was very lax in Israel; and only in the late 1990s did human rights organizations begin to take up their cause. However, the generally high level of education of the African migrants compared to other labor migrants provided them with resources and knowledge to construct their own support networks. As Godfrey said: ‘We are not stupid . . . we are only illegal . . . we know our rights and we can fight for them with lawyers that can support our own struggle . . .’ (Godfrey, 1999).

At the heart of the rich community life that the African migrants in Israel created for themselves were the many independent African Christian congregations and churches. In mid-2001, before the massive deportations, there were over forty such congregations in Tel Aviv alone, with individual membership ranging from a handful of adherents to several
hundred. This figure is significantly larger than the handful of churches established by other Christian migrants to Israel who were much more numerous.\(^\text{18}\)

**The development of African churches in Israel**

The first African migrants to Israel who wanted to pray or join a church went to one of the existing congregations in the Holy Land. Some joined special prayer meetings conducted by the Catholic Church for the Philippine migrants and others joined church services for foreign diplomats held at the Baptist, Lutheran and Anglican churches in various locations. As the number of professing African Christians was small, none of the existing churches offered special services for the African members and there was little effort to modify the prayers, despite some shy requests. Over the years, some Africans did find a home in the existing Christian communities, mainly in the Catholic and Lutheran churches in Tel-Aviv-Jaffa. They managed to carve out their own niches, join the church leadership, invite clergymen from Africa on special occasions, and integrate African liturgy into the existing one. However, the vast majority of the Africans who at first joined these mainline churches soon left to create their own churches.

Some left because they were the only blacks in the congregation: ‘I was the only Black man in the room.... It was unpleasant for me’ (Joshua, 2000). Others felt ill at ease with the difference in style and atmosphere of the churches in Israel. Some spoke of the difference as a source of spiritual frustration: ‘When we pray we shout and sing out loud.... Here everybody was so quiet that I could not be myself and I did not feel I was reaching God’ (Ezra, 2000). Others spoke of the difference more as a source of social discomfort and alienation:

- The words of the prayers were almost the same but everything else was different,.... the melodies, the way people moved in the church.... They hardly moved and I was not feeling happy about going there (Ampadu, 2000).
- I did not feel good at the church. I prayed, I sang but I felt a stranger.... I was lonely and unhappy.... it was nothing like my church at home (Alex, 1999).

The differences bothered even those Africans who attended local churches of the same denominations as those they had attended back home: ‘They had their own way and we had ours and although back home I was a member of the Anglican Church, here I felt odd’ (George, 2000). Moreover, the sermons in the existing churches did not relate to the daily reality of most Africans, the terrorism in which they found themselves and which sometimes struck directly at the area of the cen-
central bus station where most of them lived, or their situation as foreign workers in a strange land. Relevant sermons about day-to-day issues were something the Africans had come to expect from their churches in Africa, and their absence left them feeling disappointed and unfulfilled. Something that should have been part of their religious experience was missing:

Their services were very interesting and the pastor is a very intelligent man. He knows the Bible almost by heart... However, he hardly made the sermon relevant to things that were going around... We are used to sermons that give us direct answers to our daily problems and assist in solving burning issues (John, 1999).

Even if there was a terrorist attack the day before... [the pastor] would not say a word on it except to pray for peace and God's mercy... For me it was very odd. I wanted him to talk about the situation around us, to explain to me God's ways and to give me hope... I think that the pastor did not even know what we were doing in Israel, where we were working or living... Not that he did not care... but it is very different [from Africa]. He never related to issues of foreign workers, although we were there and we thought he ought to... Even one day our picture was in the paper and even then on Sunday he did not mention it in his sermon (Mike, 1999).

Most of the professing Christians in Israel were Arabs and many interviewees spoke specifically of their feelings of linguistic, social and cultural alienation from the Arab congregations:

They have their own language, they dress differently, and they are very different in their behavior during the service... They are very reserved (Gregory, 2000).

Most of the members were Arabs and they talked Arabic and had their own way... I was not part of the congregation and even though I knew the prayers, I did not like going there (Grace, 2000).

For many of them, the cultural alienation was amplified by strong religious and political animosity. Quite a number of Africans identified all Arabs, even professing Christians, with Muslims, and expressed dislike on that account: 'We don’t like the Arabs... Back home the Muslims are always related to the Arabs and we don’t associate with them... Why should I pray with them here?' (Ampadu, 2000). This may reflect the situation in Pentecostal churches in Nigeria which are at the forefront of often violent Christian-Muslim conflicts. It is also true of the situation in Ghana where Islam is proclaimed in some Pentecostal churches as the Anti-Christ incarnate. Many of the African migrants, siding with Israel’s hardliners in the Israel-Palestinian conflict, identified Arabs as the enemy and expressed aversion to praying with them:

We believe that the Arabs don’t belong in this place... They have their own countries... I don’t want to be with them in a church... I don’t want to pray with them to God (Don, 1999).
God gave this land to the Jews and not to the Arabs.... I did not want to be friendly with the Arabs.... When I first came to Israel it was only Arab congregations in Jaffa that I could join.... I went to their church once or twice.... I did not go there more than that (Abe, 1999).

Hence, many Africans searched for something else. The first African initiated congregations were small, informal fellowships usually established by people from a single country. There was no formal leadership and the congregants had little or no theological training. The sessions were conducted—or rather conducted themselves—in the expressive, emotional style of most of the AICs. Though the services were somewhat different from those at home, they provided the spiritual and social succor African migrants needed.

Initially, some five or six praying fellowships were established in southern Tel Aviv. The meetings were led by all members in a rotating system, shifting the meeting site around their apartments. Leadership was based on a group of men with no specific titles and no rigid hierarchy. Though there were no official constitutions, most members were born-again Christians who strictly forbade alcohol, pre- and extra-marital sex, smoking, etc. During this initial phase the fellowships were rather small and the membership constantly changed, but the level of commitment and religious zeal was extremely high. The money needed for buying basic equipment, printing pamphlets to attract new members, and other expenses often reached several thousand dollars and came out of the members’ savings.

Gradually a process of institutionalization set in. The small fellowships and praying groups grew into official churches, with names, affiliations and designated leaderships. The newly created churches rented small halls, basements and old warehouses for their meetings. Clear hierarchical structures were created, with a pastor, a general secretary, a treasurer, a choir and the usual committees. This process of creating official independent churches took place within the African arena in Israel; however, because of religious regulations stemming from Ottoman law, there were no links to the official religious arena of the Holy Land and only some very limited links to the civic sphere in the State of Israel.

Among the regulations that rule the Jewish character of the state of Israel are a set of laws and regulations dating back to the Ottoman period (adopted with changes by the British Mandate and later by the State of Israel) which clearly define who and what is recognized as a ‘religious congregation’. According to the King’s Order in Council of 1922,20 a limited number of religious congregations are recognized,
among them a number of Christian denominations. Only these have full rights to operate in the Holy Land (hence, in Israel), including the right to bring clergy; to own land; to operate religious courts, theological, social and welfare institutions, and so on. Over the years, some religious congregations, mainly new Christian groups such as the Mormons, found legal ways to set up religious communities in the Holy Land, but they were not granted full rights. However, the African churches, like other migrant churches, were not included on the list of recognized religious congregations. Most of them, aware of the obstacles, did not even try to register as official and recognized religious congregations.

Maintaining the new churches required greater financial resources. The churches had to pay rent, taxes, bills, buy furniture, musical instruments and uniforms, as well as set money aside for social and cultural activities. Most of the money required was locally raised. Only a handful of church leaders, with the assistance of Israeli human rights activists, applied to be recognized as non-profit organizations in order to get a deduction in municipal taxes.

A very small number of churches brought pastors from Africa, but the vast majority lacked the financial wherewithal to support full-time clergymen and the few that had the means encountered major legal obstacles. Based on the law resting on the King’s Order in Council, only specified established churches had the right to bring in clerics from abroad. To the best of my knowledge, only one African clergyman, the head of the local Church of Pentecost, had legal papers as a religious officer of the UN. He originally came to Israel in the early 1990s as pastor for Ghanaian soldiers serving with the UN forces on the border with Lebanon, and he gradually expanded his services to the growing number of African migrant laborers in Tel Aviv, Jerusalem and Eilat.

As a result of these difficulties, most of the new African churches trained and developed their leadership from within the community in Israel. Most of these local leaders worked during the day as house cleaners, and put on a pastoral gown in the evening. The small size of the potential leadership pool meant that not all those who became church leaders were fit for the job. As in Africa, most of the clergy were men. Some churches had deaconesses but these usually occupied the back benches of their church leadership.

In tandem with the institutionalization of the churches, there was a process of splitting, much as occurred throughout the AICs in Africa and the diaspora. To some extent, this stemmed from the growth in
the numbers of African migrants. But often members split off to create new prayer forums. Most of the schisms were driven not by theological disputes, but by ethnic divisions, personal rivalries and/or disagreements within the congregation on such matters as tithes, budgets and the role of women. One pastor I interviewed suggested that the greed of would-be Church leaders was behind some of the splits.

All in all, the Africans’ alienation from the existing Arab Christian congregations in the Holy Land and their consequent drive to construct their own churches created African Christian spaces, in which the migrants could feel connected to home and to other Africans, where they could worship in ways more fulfilling to them than in the mainline churches, and where they felt that their spiritual and other needs were met. From the very beginning, their churches were not built as a bridge to the host society or as a way of gaining recognition from the State of Israel, but as an arena of self-definition and self-expression in a foreign land.

Between the transnational and the local: African-Christian space—
African-Israeli-Christian space

In their structure, content and conduct, the African churches in Israel were connected to three worlds: the world of transnational Pentecostalism, the world of African Initiated Christianity and the world of Israel, in which they created what may be termed a unique African-Israeli-Christian space.

Structurally, the African churches in Israel can be classified into three groups, much as in other African diasporas.22 The first are local branches of international churches which have branches all over Africa, such as the Assemblies of God. The second are churches originally created in Africa, with branches throughout the African diaspora. These include the Church of Pentecost, Resurrection Power and Living Bread Ministries International and the Beth-El Prayer Ministry. All three are headquartered in Ghana and have many branches worldwide. The third and most prevalent group includes churches founded by the African migrant laborers themselves. These include the Evangelical Christian Assemblies, ‘Come and See’ Rock of Zion and others. Some of the more successful opened branches in Africa. Some sought recognition and affiliation with international Christian associations, while others maintained their autonomy.

Theologically, the African churches in Israel can be identified with all three types of church within African Initiated Christianity (AIC).23
African-Ethiopian churches, Prophet Healing churches (also called Spiritual or Zionist churches) and New Pentecostal churches (sometimes called Charismatic churches). As in Africa and in other African diasporas, the distinctions between the churches in Israel were not always clear and some churches did not quite fit any single category.

Most of the interviewees termed their church ‘Pentecostal’ while maintaining that its theological affiliation was immaterial. Their theological classification notwithstanding, most of the African churches in Israel did fit the New Pentecostal model. Like New Pentecostal churches worldwide, and especially those in Africa, they emphasized the power and gifts of the Holy Spirit and were concerned primarily with the experience of the Holy Spirit and the practice of spiritual gifts. They acknowledged the existence of witches and spirits (ancestral spirits, evil spirits, and so on), which are part of traditional African belief systems, while classifying them as demonic. Downplaying dogma, they emphasized narrative theology and proclaimed a pragmatic gospel that addressed practical concerns like sickness, poverty, unemployment and loneliness. Healing and deliverance were key concepts and practices. The Gospel of Prosperity, which views wealth and material success as signs of God’s love, was both preached and believed.

Services, as in most New Pentecostal churches in Africa, were in general carefully planned by each church. In most cases, the service began with a personal prayer in meditative style, followed first by a series of hymns sung by the choir and churchgoers, then by the choir singing alone. As in African Pentecostal churches in general, singing was a key feature of the service, and accompanied most parts of it. To the traditional hymns were added songs and prayers composed by talented church members. There was one longish sermon or several short ones, each delivered by a different person, using the style of call and response. Within this tight structure, there was considerable room for member participation. In accord with common Pentecostal practice, at any point in the service members could make personal requests, for example, for specific prayers or for prayers for particular people.

Church members were also given active roles in leading the songs, starting the prayers and working up the congregants’ enthusiasm. Towards the end of the service, time was sometimes left for sharing dreams and personal testimonies. Healing and deliverance sessions could be held, sometimes planned in advance, sometimes in response to a member’s request or observable state at the moment, to cure members who were ill or to deliver them from different types of evils, whether spiritual or social.
At every service, money was collected both to support the church activities in Israel and to send back to sister churches in Africa or, if there was no sister church, to support development projects there. Fundraising was usually a major part of the service, taking up a good amount of time and invested with major emotional and symbolic significance. Also solicited were tithes and special donations, sometimes obtained, sometimes not. The service ended with announcements.

The atmosphere in most of the churches was informal, consciously warm and upbeat, and reminiscent of home. Most of the congregants knew one another and newcomers were warmly welcomed. Many came dressed in traditional African garb. Children ran about and were taken care of by whoever was at hand. Handshakes, hugs and verbal greetings were incorporated into the service, with the pastor directing the congregants to ‘turn around and tell your neighbor how glad you are to see him here’ and ‘shake your neighbor’s hand and hug him’ several times in the course of the service. Spontaneity combined with an orchestrated build-up to a state of ecstasy expressed in dancing, strongly emotional prayer, speaking in tongues or trance. As in Pentecostal churches worldwide, the service provided release and feelings of community and togetherness.

In Israel, Pentecostal seems to have become an umbrella term covering a great variety of churches. For example, churches that practiced healing using symbolic objects, that invoked ancestral spirits, and whose members and clergy wore uniforms were termed Pentecostal, though most Pentecostal churches in Africa do not follow these practices. The expansion of the term Pentecostal in Israel, with the affiliation it signifies, is probably an outcome of the current popularity of the Pentecostal movement in Africa and elsewhere in the African diaspora. Pentecostalism is a worldwide religious movement that traverses national boundaries, and thereby anchors believers simultaneously in their place of migration, their homeland and the global Pentecostal community. Much like Islam for Muslim migrants in Europe and North America, Christian Pentecostalism creates what has been termed a ‘global sacred geography’. It is thus a movement with particular appeal to uprooted migrants seeking identity, community, connection and meaning. Moreover, the loose structure and inclusive nature of Pentecostalism make it attractive to young churches in the process of identity formation.

Adaptation, accommodation and modification

Like Pentecostal churches worldwide which adapt to the local environment, the African churches adapted to conditions in Israel. The
adaptations stemmed from both constraints in Israel and the specific needs of the membership. A major accommodation was the switch in the Sabbath service from Sunday to Saturday to accommodate the workweek in Israel, altering the practice adopted by the early Christians to distinguish themselves from the Jewish world and the Jewish roots from which they came. Despite the significance implied by this change, the African migrants opted to work on Sunday and pray on Saturday. Even in Methodist and Anglican churches in Tel Aviv, which conducted separate services for different national groups, the main service for Africans was held on Saturday. This accommodation was not one that all Christian migrant groups in Israel made: some, like the Romanians and the Polish, did, but the large Filipino and smaller Latin American migrant communities generally did not. In addition, midday church services common in AICs were either cancelled or moved to the evening, after work hours.

The churches also adapted to the travel restrictions resulting from the undocumented status of most of their members. Like other religious communities with large diasporas, the AICs, in Israel as elsewhere, strove to maintain active links with fellow churches worldwide. Needless to say, such links were difficult to maintain when church members could not leave the country without risking not being permitted to re-enter it and when traveling foreign clerics—in this case, African preachers—could not enter Israel freely because of concerns that they would stay on illegally. This problem exists to some extent in other African diasporas, but was particularly severe in Israel, where almost all the Africans lacked legal status. To circumvent the restrictions, the local African Christian communities made extensive use of the internet, video letters and mobile phones. They also tried to invite European and American preachers or Africans who held European or American passports.

Major adaptations were also made by the churches to conform to the laws and norms of Israel. The churches refrained from missionary activity among Israelis because this was illegal, thus giving up a practice widespread among Pentecostal churches elsewhere. In addition, to avoid offending Israeli sensibilities, they did not put identifying signs outside the premises they rented. Israelis readily accept the existence of mosques and churches in Arab areas, as well as churches in the traditional holy sites; however, the sight of churches in Jewish residential neighborhoods would probably have created a considerable sense of threat and anxiety. With good grace and understanding, as well as wariness of provoking the ire of their hosts, the African churches thus relinquished not only the most effective means of identifying themselves
to prospective visitors, but also the means by which they could proclaim their power, legitimacy, prestige and vitality in Africa and throughout the Christian world.

For similar reasons, they also refrained from externalizing their religion in parades and processions, even though such externalization was commonplace among the registered Christian churches in Israel, both Arab and others, and also among Christian pilgrims to the Holy Land. The public celebration of religion by migrant churches worldwide is an act of self-assertion that serves both as a means of making the migrants feel at home and as a way of claiming recognition and legitimacy. In keeping a low profile, the African churches in Israel relinquished the claim of migrant religious communities elsewhere to be recognized and accepted in their host country as a worthy and legitimate religious group.

Substantial changes were also made to accommodate the membership in Israel. The membership of most African churches consisted of persons of different ethnic groups and languages. Thus varied and often complex ways were adopted to make it possible for all the members to participate, including holding separate services for speakers of different languages or using elaborate systems of translation into as many as four different languages. They were clearly willing to tolerate the resulting tediousness in order to make the services available to as many members of the community as possible.

Similarly, services were modified to appeal to the relatively young age of most of the migrant community, which ranged (excluding the children) from around 20 to 45. There was more singing in many churches than back home; and the music included more disco, rap and Afro-pop. The Gospel of Prosperity was often preached with particular fervor, as it was received favorably by the young congregants who came to Israel to better their economic lot.

Key rituals were adapted and others invented to accommodate the varied national and ethnic backgrounds and previous denominational affiliations of church members. Since there were many more marriages in Israel than in Africa between Africans of different ethnic groups as well as between Africans and non-Africans (mainly with Filipinos and only very rarely with Israelis), the churches found themselves negotiating diverse traditions with respect both to the prerequisites of the marriage and to the marriage ceremony itself. They also engaged in such negotiations in baby-naming ceremonies and, in the non-Pentecostal churches, in baptisms. In all of these instances, the churches made efforts to accommodate the diverse practices of their members, while
quietly dispensing with elements of the tradition to which they would have adhered in Africa.

The church services underwent a variety of modifications in response to the hardships, distress and concerns of the African community in Israel. According to the interviewees, the services incorporated more healing than was common in analogous African churches, and there were more extra healing sessions and free prayer evenings. Churches and pastors who seldom performed healing in Africa did so in Israel, and, if they did not know how, they made sure to learn or to have experienced healers on hand. Also, according to the interviewees, trance became a more prominent feature of the services. The augmented healing and trance may have reflected the churches’ efforts to channel and provide an acceptable outlet for the pent up anguish of their members, especially after 2003 when fear of arrest and deportation became their daily reality.

Another important modification can be found in the moral strictness of the churches. The Pentecostal churches in Africa tend to enforce behavioral codes. Persons immodestly dressed are not given entry. Smoking and drinking are taboo, as are pre- and extra-marital sex. Sanctions are usually applied to members who openly violate the taboos. The African churches in Israel tended to be less strict, both because they were loathe to lose members in a small community with a limited membership pool and because, much as in the United States and Europe, they lacked the power to stem the impact of liberal currents to which their community was exposed. Many of the churches were also less strict with regard to traditional African non-Christian practices and beliefs. These are of great concern in most of the AICs in Africa, including the Pentecostal, and there is considerable discussion there about which rites and beliefs to accept, which to reject and how to accommodate those that are accepted. The AICs in Israel seemed to make fewer efforts to draw such lines. Persons who went to witch-doctors or engaged in ancestor worship, for example, could remain active church members even if their church formally forbade such activities. Moreover, under certain circumstances (as for example in marital and death rites), non-Christian practices that would not have been accepted in the sister church in Africa were included in the church ritual. This permissiveness stemmed from the same source as permissiveness with respect to behavioral codes. As one pastor vividly explained with respect to a marriage service in his church, ‘Sometimes I close my eyes not to see things... If I was too strict with these people... they would have lived in complete sin in Israel’ (Pastor Tie, 2001).
Over the years, the sermons and prayers took on a clear political content. There was much talk both of world affairs, including such topics as terror and the global economy, and of more local issues, like the Israeli-Palestinian conflict, the deportations and human rights issues. For example, after September 11, sermons abounded on the global conflict between Christianity and Islam, with expressions of considerable consternation over the role of Islamic terror in restricting the movement of migrants from the third world to the first. Prayers asking God to empower the Jews against the Arabs, to stop the terror and suicide bombings, to restore Israel’s economic prosperity, and to put an end to the arrest and deportation of migrant laborers were regular features of many services. There were also frequent explanations of the rightness of Israel’s stand against terror. Before and during the second Gulf War, there were sermons explaining the importance of America’s role in freeing the world from the ‘Iraqi Satan’.

The flood of politics into sermon and prayer seems quite remarkable in light of the Africans’ sense of transience in Israel. It stemmed from the penetration of politics into every sphere of life in Israel including the lives of those who were on the fringe of society. With the beginning of the extensive deportations in the early 2000s, there was some change in tone. Some church leaders began to criticize Israeli government policy towards migrant laborers, and particularly the practice of deportation. Whole evenings were devoted to criticize Israeli government policy towards migrant laborers, and particularly the practice of deportation. Most of these prayers and sermons were performed with great awareness of the danger they could cause if the themes leaked to the Israeli public. At times visitors were asked to leave; otherwise, members were advised not to translate the prayers for outsiders. Indeed, until the end of 2003, most church leaders called on their followers to abstain from public criticism of Israel and to avoid voicing their grievances in the public sphere. Only a few Africans came out publicly against the state of Israel and all stated that, while they identified themselves as devoted Christians, they were expressing their opinions as private people.

The Christianity practiced by Africans in Israel was not a new invention, but rather was flexible and sensitive to its members’ needs on the one hand and to local and international circumstances on the other. This flexibility enabled the African churches to flourish within a generally tolerant but nonetheless alien and restrictive climate; to make themselves available and attractive to members of different national, ethnic and linguistic backgrounds and to a younger membership than was usual.
in Africa; and to address the needs and concerns of the African migrant community that the mainline churches ignored. It also enabled them to provide a place where Africans felt comfortable among other Africans and could seek personal salvation and express their Africanness in all of its diversity: in music, rites and language, in dress and behavior and in the style and content of their worship. By preserving ties with both the International Pentecostal world and their communities back home, the local African churches kept open all future options for their members. In their structure, content and conduct, they created a potential platform for the Africans either to return home and re-integrate or to find a new home elsewhere.

The expanded role of the church

Turning inward, the African churches expanded their role in the community. In both the spiritual and the secular realms, they assumed functions and took on responsibilities that made them increasingly important in the lives of their members and of the entire African migrant community in Israel.

In the spiritual realm, the churches came to replace the extended family and traditional community leaders in key lifespan rituals, such as marital and death rites. The church’s marriage certificate was neither recognized nor instrumental in the Israeli public arena because Israel does not recognize the civic responsibility or civic authority of any organization—particularly non-recognized religious groups—in performing marriages. Nevertheless, the churches continued to perform these ceremonies and issue certificates, not in an attempt to gain legitimization of the marriage in Israel, but rather, for use back home and in other parts of the world.

The churches’ role in death rites expanded even more. Most Africans who died in Israel were sent home for burial; only the poorest and those without family or friends to see to the transport of the corpse were buried in Israel. But for those who did bury their dead in Israel, the church was a key player. With the family far away, it was usually left to church members and leadership to see to the storage, handling and burial of the corpse. These tasks were complicated because the deceased could not be buried in the family plot or churchyard, as they would be in Africa, and also because almost all cemeteries in Israel are specifically designated for one of the registered religious communities. Since the African Initiated Churches were neither affiliated with nor
recognized by any of the established Christian churches, this meant that for any African to be buried in Israel a suitable plot had to be actively searched out and negotiated for.

The churches also became involved in those death rituals that generally precede burial in West Africa. These are elaborate affairs, involving ceremonial feasts, dancing and music, with hired performers and keeners, and a variety of traditional African religious leaders, that typically extend over several months, sometimes as long as a year, before the corpse is buried. In Israel they were drastically truncated, for two reasons. One was the limited availability and prohibitive cost of long-term storage facilities for corpses, resulting from the fact that Jewish and Muslim law both require the rapid interment of the dead, usually within a day. The other was the absence of the extended family and the various other persons required for these rituals. To compensate somewhat, the churches adapted key traditional rituals—in which they had never previously been involved—and created new ones, performed, albeit in greatly shortened and more modest form, in the church after the burial. In these rituals, church members filled in for the relatives of the deceased, performing the mourning duties in the traditional garb of the family; if required by the family they took part in appeasing the spirit of the deceased, even though this would not have been approved in most Pentecostal churches in Africa, and collected money for the burial and for the family of the deceased.

The involvement in marital, death and other rituals in which they had previously played a much more limited part enlarged the spiritual arena in which the churches operated. In Africa, the church leadership shared the cultural and spiritual arenas with traditional leaders; in Israel, virtually the entire African space became theirs. Moreover, in assuming the roles and responsibilities of family, friends and traditional leaders at pivotal points in persons’ lives, the churches accrued some of the authority and emotional attachment that these figures commanded and, in many ways, came to replace them as key anchors in the spiritual and emotional lives of the African migrant community in Israel.

As part of the process of turning inward, and because the Israeli civic arena was de facto not open to non-Jewish migrants, the African churches expanded their role by gradually assuming an important position in the worldly lives of the Africans in Israel. Like places of worship in other diasporas, the African churches in Israel offered new arrivals a warm embrace, which included not only friendship and solidarity but also practical assistance, such as finding housing and work. The church was where Africans in Israel made friends and, to some extent, found
a substitute for family at home. One of the first African arrivals in Israel attributed the establishment of the early praying fellowships to the longing for family:

I was almost the first African to come to Israel.... I was so lonely.... When we established our praying fellowship the other men became my brothers.... I could trust them and they trusted me.... We helped each other, supported each other, and it was like a small family.... We all left a big family back home and we needed this kind of bonding (John Markuvia, 2000).

Indeed, the churches acted like family in just about every area of people’s daily lives. Church members arranged not only traditional church events but also birthday parties, farewell celebrations, the launching of CDs and books produced by church members, and other events that in Africa would have been organized by relatives. The churches also acted as arbitrators in members’ disputes and intervened in cases of domestic violence or other marital problems—thereby standing in for the chiefs or elders in Africa. They visited the sick and held prayer sessions for quick healing. They collected funds to help members pay their hospital bills or to bail them out of jail or deportation centers where they might be held for overstaying their visas. In the larger and better-organized churches, these tasks were managed and performed by formal social and welfare committees; in the other churches, they were performed informally by members and clergy.

The churches also became the locus of economic activity and served as a forum for the dissemination of information and education. Before and after services, members could buy and sell imported goods, homemade food, made-in-Israel African clothes, religious books, cassettes and jewelry. They could rent apartments, register their children in home-based nurseries, and look for jobs. Lectures were held on subjects ranging from childrearing skills and AIDS prevention to the history and politics of Israel.

In addition, the churches helped their members to retain their connections with Africa and the rest of the Christian world. They organized lectures and seminars on home politics and encouraged involvement in them. Some raised money for African politicians or for political and social causes at home, and some for investments in Africa. They fostered ties with the international Christian world both through the instruments of modern telecommunications and through personal exchanges. In addition to inviting international preachers, church members also flocked to the international church ‘crusades’ held several times a year in the Holy Land. The connection with home and with the larger Christian world somewhat ameliorated the loneliness and isolation of the Africans.
in Israel. It was also an important source of dignity, belonging and self respect for the community, which was marginalized and largely powerless.

Last but not least, the churches assumed a kind of political role in the lives of the African migrants. Although they had no direct political influence, church leaders, sometimes alone, sometimes in conjunction with leaders of the African Workers Union, lobbied to improve the living conditions and legal status of the Africans in Israel, and worked to improve the relations between the community and the police. They met with Knesset members, the Mayor of Tel Aviv and other politicians, and with deportation and other police. They sent petitions, complaints and policy proposals to all and sundry. Some of their activities were public, others behind the scenes. Beginning in the mid-1990s, the churches joined with a variety of NGOs, including the Association for Human Rights, The Hot Line and Doctors for Human Rights, to bring their plight to the attention of the media and academic conferences. The relationship was initiated by the organizations, who sought ways of reaching the migrants, but the churches eagerly took up their lead, inviting their representatives to speak, distribute written material and listen to the congregants’ complaints. More recently, the church leadership began to cooperate with the leaderships of other migrant churches, especially the Latin American and Filipino churches. These activities brought the plight of the migrant laborers to the attention of the Israeli media and public and made the African migrants better aware of their rights in key areas of labor relations, health and education, and arrest and deportation. All in all the African church leaders were careful not to upset Israeli authorities or to claim any rights based on their religiosity. Most of their grievances and demands were phrased within the discourse on human rights and plea of mercy and not in terms of citizenship.

Their involvement in and relevance to so many spheres of the African migrants’ lives made the African churches in Israel places that drew and held congregants. Most members came to church at least three or four times a week, and some more often. Many interviewees reported that, even though they were church members in Africa, the church became much more important to them in Israel and their church attendance greatly increased. The interviewees gave a variety of reasons for this increased involvement. The major ones were practical and social—friendship, community, mutual help, sharing information, and pastoral guidance away from home:

My church in Tel Aviv is big and good. I go there about three times a week to pray and to be with my friends. I go a lot... I need to be with my friends and...
it is a good place to meet many of them . . . . Also on the Church board I learn what is going on. Who is going back and is sending a container . . . . Who is getting married . . . . Who is selling things . . . who is cooking food I can buy [Ray, Tel Aviv 2000].

Others talked about the personal empowerment that the Church facilitated:

Here, in church I am the master in my own domain. Here we are travelers, we are caged, we are in a hurry. In church, we are relaxed, we are a little less caged, we are a little less afraid of all [Raymond, Tel Aviv, 2001].

The result for many was a deepened religiosity. This was often attributed to the first-hand experience of Israel’s holy places and the workings of the holy spirit, but undoubtedly owed a great deal to the fact that the churches met the Africans’ spiritual, social and emotional needs in Israel and provided an arena where their anxieties were given meaning and to some extent even solved. Among these were the need for recognition and legitimacy, which they could obtain in church and in their community through their church, but not in society at large.

By way of conclusion: commonalities and singularities

Many of the processes described above are not unique to the African churches in Israel. Migrant communities everywhere quickly establish socio-religious organizations that meet a combination of spiritual and practical needs. Diaspora churches worldwide, whether African or any other, welcome new arrivals and serve as loci of warmth and friendship, fill in for the family left back home, and engage in a variety of social, economic, educational and political activities. These functions are also fulfilled by many churches in Africa. Diaspora churches (as well as temples, mosques and synagogues) typically adapt to local circumstances and undergo a variety of transformations that enable them to function in their new environment and, at the same time, make them quite different from what they were in the home country. In some of the western nation states including Israel, where there is no recognition of civic responsibilities toward non-citizens, migrant churches fill the gap. The clear examples are their performance of marriages, namings and dedications and other significant life events.

However, the African churches in Israel occupied a particularly significant place in the lives of the African migrant community. For it was through their religion and in their churches that the African migrants sought and found the legitimacy that they were denied in Israel’s public sphere. In other words, in contrast to other migrant communities in the West, among the African migrant workers in Israel, religion and
house of worship functioned not as avenues to public legitimacy but as their main space for belonging within the experiential context of uprootedness, displacement and marginality. There are several reasons for these differences.

First, the role of the African churches was vastly augmented because African migrants in Israel had far fewer alternative anchors of belonging and sources of social, economic and political support than in other diasporas. As a young, small and relatively temporary diaspora with no civic horizon, African migrants in Israel did not have the well-developed national and ethnic associations common in Europe and North America. To be sure, there were a variety of sports and music clubs, rotating credit associations, and nationality- or ethnicity- based associations. But these had few members and were weighed down by bureaucracy, ethnic divisions and personal infighting. The better-organized African Workers Union (AWU), founded in 1997 with the help of Israeli human rights activists and a small number of Knesset members, often worked in conjunction with the churches but its scope was limited to labor-related matters.

The role of the churches was also augmented by the Africans’ lack of legal status in Israel. In most African diasporas in Europe and America, the community consists of a mix of documented and undocumented migrants; and in most of them there are a variety of ways of obtaining work permits and often citizenship as well. In Israel, virtually all the African migrants were undocumented and their stay illegal; there were very few ways for undocumented workers to obtain work permits; and, with very few exceptions, citizenship was out of reach, even for Israeli-born children of migrants. The African migrants’ tenuous legal status in Israel made it impossible for them to exert political influence as actual or potential voters. It made it extremely difficult for them to obtain state insurance to cover accidents, health care, maternity leave and other benefits that Israelis pay for and obtain through the state. And it exposed them to the constant threat of deportation. Against these hardships, the churches’ political activities, ranging from education and advocacy through intervention with the deportation officers, were tremendously important. So were seemingly banal acts like serving as an address for their members, who, fearing deportation, were afraid to give their names and addresses to banks, schools and health clinics.

Finally, Israel’s character as a Jewish state, with a very small Christian minority, also augments the importance of the African churches, in several ways. It means that there were relatively few churches in Israel
outside the areas of the holy sites and also that, in contrast to Europe and North America, there were virtually no large Christian communities with whom African migrants could affiliate, especially since they felt alienated from and even hostile towards the Arab Christians. As a result, the African migrants in Israel did not have the large variety of churches of all denominations and with heterogeneous memberships that are available to Africans in the European and American diasporas. This not only pushed them into creating their own churches; it made those churches the only ones they had.

Along with its restrictions on citizenship, the fact that Israel is a Jewish state also meant that there was little if any hope for the African migrants to integrate into the society, or be part of the limited civic religion that was clearly connected to Judaism, however long they remained. Nor did the African churches have much hope of attaining legitimation for the African Christians in Israel’s public sphere. This was not because of any lack of will. Most of the Africans interviewed for this study spoke of Israel as the Holy Land and intimated that this gave them a sense of belonging. The contrast between their emotional attachment to the land and the Christian holy places, on the one hand, and their exclusion from the public domain and their lack of civic horizon, on the other, was a source of barely suppressed bitterness. There was the feeling that, as devout Christians, they had the inalienable right to remain in Israel and to enjoy a variety of vaguely specified rights in the country. On the other hand, they made a cognitive distinction between the Holy Land and the modern State of Israel. Most understood and ostensibly accepted that their stay in Israel could only be temporary and that they would never obtain the citizenship or even civic recognition.

The churches were thus careful not to make claims challenging Israel’s self-definition as a Jewish state, the norms that expressed it or the laws designed to maintain it. The above pages have shown how the churches kept a low profile and avoided public display. It should be added here that their political activities, as meaningful as they were to their members, remained within fairly modest bonds. There were no explicit demands for citizenship or even permanent status, no demand for recognition as religious or national minorities, and no effort to participate in the wider political arena of Israel. Vertovec has termed the various activities of diaspora religious communities in the public sphere ‘politics of recognition’, whereby they sought to gain favor, recognition and legitimacy in the eyes of both the government and the society. The African churches in Israel were similarly engaged in the ‘politics of
recognition’, but only to a limited extent. By keeping a low profile and restricting their political activities largely to the human—as opposed to civic—rights of their communities, they seem to have foregone in advance any overt claim to communal legitimacy in the public sphere.

Paradoxically, the African churches in Israel ultimately reinforced the insulation and isolation of the African migrants. The churches became islands, albeit with bridges to Israeli society, as well as to home and to transnational Christianity. On these islands, the members were safe and empowered, but also increasingly dependent. Israel’s Jewish character means that the Africans’ Christianity, which is such a core element of their identity, set the African migrants apart from others in Israel, augmented their loneliness, and led them to cling to their churches all the more as a source not only of community and communality, but also of dignity, self worth, and personal legitimacy in a society where they were a marginalized and alien minority.

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NOTES

1. The quotes throughout are taken from interviews held with hundreds of Africans; see note 10 below. All the names are either first names or fictitious.

2. In many of the classic studies on immigrant incorporation processes, researchers have pointed to the continued salience of religion among immigrants. See, for example, Gordon 1964; Glazer and Moynihan 1963; Herberg 1955.


7. Adogame 2001; van Dijk 1997, 1999a, 1999b, 2002; Simson 2002; see also Sabar 2004. Soon to be included among the exceptions are papers on the Redeemed Christian Church of Nigeria in Europe, on the Cherubim and Seraphim churches in Great Britain and the US, and on Charismatic Christianity among Ghanaian Immigrants in Germany and in Israel, in the forthcoming book edited by Adogame and Weiskoeppel.


10. This study is based on 265 open-ended, in-depth interviews conducted in Israel and in Africa, and over a thousand hours of participant observations of different church-related activities at a variety of African churches in Israel (of different religious orientations, nationalities, and ethnic groups) between 1999 and 2004. Interviewees were located through snowballing, beginning with an African friend of mine who introduced me to many other members of the African community. The interviewees consisted of men and women, more or less half and half, ranging in age from 20 to 40, from different African countries. Most of the interviews were conducted in churches during and after services. Most were conducted in English, and some in French. Once the interviews were under way, the interviewees were encouraged to talk freely about their daily lives in Israel, with minimal interference, other than requests for examples and clarifications. It soon became clear from the interviewees’ accounts that the church and religious activities were major elements of their mundane realities. It was only then that I began to ask about these specifically.

Participant observations began shortly after the first interviews and were carried out throughout the interviewing process. The first observations were equally of church- and non-church-related activities but church-related activities gradually took center stage. The observations were made in the course of attendance at the regular weekly church services as well as at ‘free prayer’ meetings, women’s groups and men’s fellowships, bible study classes and individual and group healing sessions; church organized trips to Christian holy sites; weddings, funerals, naming and dedication for newly born babies; as well as labor union meetings and political gatherings held in the churches. There were also countless home visits. Also observed were a variety of small businesses, such as nurseries and kindergartens, hairdressing salons, dressmakers, caterers, recording studios, computer classes and others, which were advertised in the churches and sometimes conducted there as well.

The interviews were transcribed, verbatim, insofar as possible, in the course of the conversation or immediately afterwards. The transcripts and notes from the interviews and observations were analyzed using the constant comparative method (Strauss and Corbin 1990).

15. The African Workers Union, the General Federation of Trade in Israel, African church leaders and other NGOs.
18. See, for example, Kemp and Raijman 2003, on Latin American migrant laborers in Israel.
19. Personal communication, Rijk van Dijk. See also Kastfelt 1994.
20. The Palestine Order in Council of 1922, a legal document carrying His Majesty’s seal, determined the administration of the territory of Palestine and outlined the jurisdiction of the religious courts in matters of personal status, the religious communities recognized by the Government, and issues of law.
21. The two original Christian congregations that were granted official status under the Ottomans were the Eastern-Orthodox Church and the Latin (Roman Catholic) church. All the other churches were granted official recognition over time until the last amendment to the King’s Order in Council of 1922, the Palestine (Amendment) Order in Council of 25 May 1939, was issued on this matter. Today the State of Israel recognizes the following religions: Jewish, Christian, Muslim, Druze and Baha’i. Within
the Christian religion the following denominations are recognized: Greek Orthodox, Greek Catholic, Latin (Roman Catholic), Armenian Orthodox, Armenian Catholic, Maronite, Syrian Orthodox, Syrian Catholic, Chaldaic (Catholic) and Evangelical Episcopal (Anglican). See Cobi, 1988.

22. These classifications of the structural and theological affiliations of the African churches in Israel are based on my observations and interviews.

23. The older terms ‘African Independent Church’ and ‘African Indigenous Church’ have been replaced recently by several researchers with ‘African Initiated Church’ or ‘African Instituted Church’, all using the familiar acronym ‘AIC’. See, for example, Anderson 2001, 2000; Pobee and Ositelu 1998.


26. The single clear exception were the members of the Nigerian-based Olumba Olumba Obu movement who in Israel called themselves the Brotherhood of the Cross and the Star—Olumba Olumba Church. Its members in Israel clearly defined their church as a spiritual-prophetic healing church. In their prayers they made extensive use of symbolic objects, such as water and earth; they wore uniforms; and adhered to particularly strict moral codes. The church was relatively small, with about 50 to 70 members. Most other Africans referred to it as a cult and refused to include its members in community activities organized by their churches.


28. In other African diasporas in the West, these missionary activities are extremely important. According to van Dijk (2002), they represent one of the latest expressions of African Pentecostalism and are an extension of the popular method of tent evangelism pioneered mainly by North Americans in the 1940s and 1950s (with roots in the nineteenth-century revivals).

29. Similar problems are encountered by Africans in Muslim countries, such as Morocco; see Goldschmidt 2004.


31. These activities were part of the churches’ involvement in globalization processes. The churches tried to make themselves relevant to and part of global processes. See Beyer 1994; Menjivar 1999, 2001.

